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Marcos Backer Riles State Department

The diplomatic world is a topsy-turvy place where yesterday's bad guys often become today's good guys, or vice versa.

The current state of relations between the Reagan administration and the Ferdinand Marcos regime in the Philippines is a case in point. It's hard to follow the zigs and zags of the game without a scorecard. Here's the latest lineup:

The White House and State Department, after dutifully apologizing for Marcos and the system of repression he has imposed on his people over the last 20 years, have suddenly become his severest critics. This change of attitude bothers the administration's more strident supporters, who see Marcos as a reliable anticommunist ally whose successor might be another Ayatollah Khomeini.

The administration's change of heart is bizarre enough. But now it turns out that one of Marcos' supporters is Sen. John Melcher, a Montana Democrat who was long regarded by the New Right as a bleeding-heart liberal.

What's going on?

The State Department is furious at Melcher. With the zeal of a new convert, the diplomatic corps is trying to make up for its years of winking at Marcos' excesses. Apparently afflicted with a case of "Iranian Syndrome," the president's foreign policy advisers don't want the United States too closely identified with the Marcos regime, as it once was with the late shah of Iran.

It has evidently dawned on the State Department that, even if Marcos succeeds in weathering his growing opposition, he can't live forever. A bitterly anti-American successor in Manila would shut down

the vital U.S. naval and air bases in the Philippines as quickly as Khomeini sent the CIA packing.

In the fervor of their new-time religion, the State Department experts resent Melcher for buddying up to the dictator they're trying to bring to heel.

The senator is furious at the State Department for throwing obstacles in the way of American wheat sales to the Philippines. Hoping to end the rampant corruption that has characterized wheat sales to the Philippine government's National Food Authority, the State Department is demanding that the sales be handled by private companies.

Manila balked at this demand, possibly because the National Food Authority is run by a Marcos crony. Now the Philippine bakers' cartel is threatening to buy its wheat from Australia, which would cut U.S. farmers out of the picture entirely.

Our associate Lucette Lagnado has seen the cable traffic between Washington and Manila on the controversy. Foggy Bottom is particularly exercised over a letter Melcher wrote to Marcos, in which, along with some criticism, he praised Marcos for "curtailing some of the country's economic problems and the progress that is easily visible in affirmation of the principles of democracy, the freedom of expression and assembly."

This, of course, was hardly as effusive as Vice President Bush's famous 1981 toast in Manila, extolling Marcos for "adherence to democratic principles and to the democratic processes."

But policy has changed since then, and U.S. diplomats bemoan the fact that Melcher's letter was given big play in the pro-Marcos Philippine press as evidence of continued firm U.S. support.